

Quality in Early Childhood Classrooms

Virginia Board of Education Work Session

April 21, 2021

Objective and Agenda

This presentation will review current research related to measuring and supporting quality in birth-to-five classrooms.

1. Understanding Core Elements of Quality Early Learning in Birth-to-Five Settings
 - a. Evidence for Interactions
 - b. Evidence for Curriculum
2. Measuring and Improving Quality in Early Childhood
 - a. Supporting Improvement at Scale
 - b. Importance of Educator Buy-in
3. Supporting Growth Over Time

The State of Early Learning in VA

Fall 2020 data show a significant impact of COVID 19 on Virginia's youngest learners. Here are estimates of children entering kindergarten without the resources, opportunities, and experiences to be successful:

When only using literacy (PALS)

- 26%



Using VKRP— literacy, math, self-regulation and social skills

- 45%



For students from low-income backgrounds

- 56%



Not all Virginia children have access to high quality early learning opportunities

High quality early childhood education (ECE) experiences set the stage for success in school, and have lasting effects for children, families, and communities. Yet there are two key challenges to overcome:

1. Not all children have access to early learning opportunities
2. The quality of of early childhood opportunities is often low and varies considerably
 - On average, quality is lower in child care settings (relative to Head Start and pre-k)
 - Infants and toddlers are least likely to have access to high quality early learning experiences

Understanding Core Elements of Quality Early Learning in Birth-to-Five Settings

Systemwide change requires a focus on factors that are consistently linked to child development

- High quality early learning experiences set the stage for school success and can narrow early opportunity gaps
- The adults who care for, interact with, and teach young children are the key drivers of “high quality” early learning opportunities
- Curricula provides structures and materials to support consistent and intentional interactions between children and adults



Adult-child interactions are fundamental to children's learning and development

- Interactions are defined as ongoing back-and-forth exchanges between a child and “significant others” (parents, siblings, peers, and teachers) in their environment and are central in supporting children's learning and development



- Responsive interactions with teachers help infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children by providing a secure base (e.g., reliable source of comfort and safety) from which to explore their environments
- Scaffolded interactions with teachers help children master increasingly difficult tasks that extend their learning and development

Quality adult-child interactions may be found in all early childhood settings

A robust evidence base shows that children in classrooms with high quality interactions benefit academically, socially, and behaviorally – across diverse settings:

- State-funded PreK
- Head Start
- Child care
- Family day homes
- Infant/toddlers
- Rural settings



Curriculum helps teachers provide high-quality interactions

- Curriculum consists of the “**plans for the learning experiences** through which children acquire knowledge, skills, abilities, and understanding” (NAEYC, 2020, pg. 25)
 - Define specific, sequenced learning goals
 - Provide structure, routines
 - Activities promote children’s engagement
 - Scripts help teachers scaffold children’s learning (i.e., how to explain concepts)
 - Can promote consistency across classrooms

Supporting educators to use curriculum yields greater impact on children

- Curriculum use, paired with ongoing support for teachers' implementation, yields strong impacts on children's school readiness skills
- Classrooms using the same curriculum vary in their frequency of learning activities and overall quality
- Teachers need to be supported through professional development to implement curricula with high levels of fidelity and quality



Measuring and Improving Quality in Early Childhood

Despite the developmental science, state systems often focus on lengthy and broad definitions of quality

- **Interaction quality**
- **Curriculum**
- Staff qualifications
- Staff training
- Classroom environments
- Leadership characteristics
- Family engagement
- Child assessments
- Health and safety
- Ratio
- Group size
- Cultural/linguistic diversity

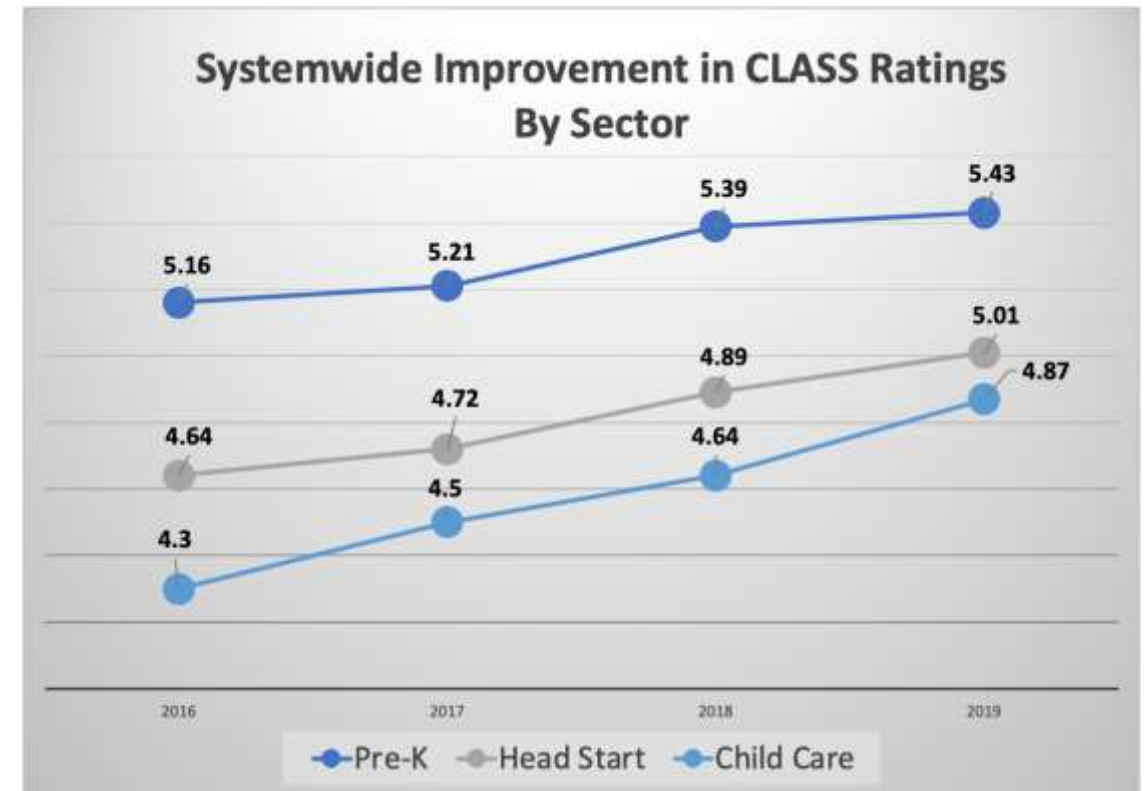
Systemwide change requires a focus on factors that are consistently linked to child development

Quality measurement is complex, but state policies should focus on fewer but most relevant aspects (Cannon et al 2017)

- Complexity is costly
- Focus on aspects of quality that teachers and sites can improve
- Focus on aspects of quality most linked to children's development

Statewide focus on interaction quality can lead to improved quality *and* more equitable access

- Efforts in other states show how a uniform approach focused on interactions can drive statewide continuous improvement
- Child care improved more and at a faster rate



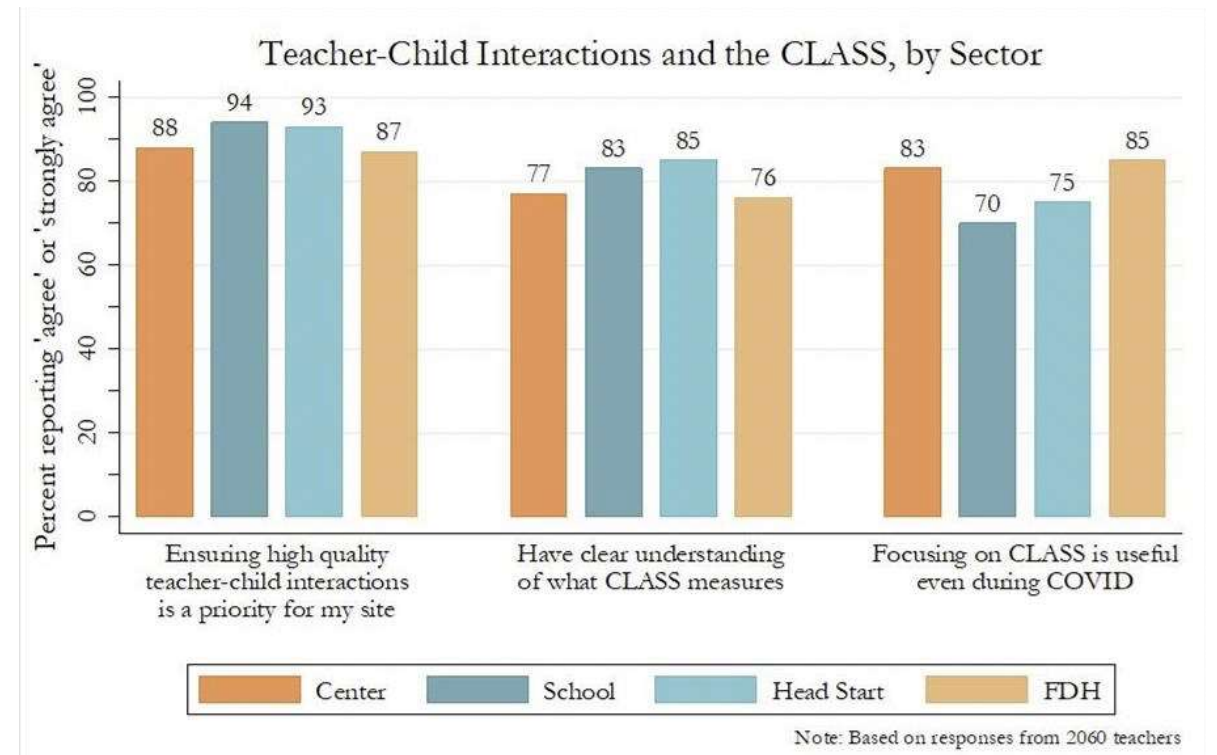
How states can help drive system-wide improvement

- A clear definition of quality that is (1) linked to child outcomes; (2) makes sense to early educators; (3) is under their control.
- A commitment to quality measurement as a tool for tracking improvement and targeting supports
- A focus on improvement and growth, coupled with the necessary investments needed (e.g. professional development, compensation, etc.)
- A focus on equity and targeted supports for sites with greatest need

Securing educator buy-in is essential to supporting improvement in every classroom

Survey of 2000+ Virginia educators across program types suggests:

- Interactions are a priority;
- Educators understand CLASS; and
- CLASS can be useful, even during COVID



Supporting Children's Growth Over Time

VKRP provides an understanding of readiness skills and tools to support early learning

- **VKRP is a set of coordinated assessments**

Literacy (PALS), math, self-regulation, and social skills combined to provide teachers with a more comprehensive picture of students' skills at the beginning and end of pre-k and kindergarten

- **VKRP is a reporting system**

Provides detailed and integrated information about students' skills at the student (for teachers and families), classroom, school, division, and state levels

- **VKRP is a set of instructional resources**

Supports teachers to understand students' skill levels and to use instructional practices to support their learning and growth

VKRP benefits educators, leaders and families at each level of the system

Teachers:

- User-friendly reports and carefully vetted instructional resources help educators identify students' strengths and support student growth in areas they need it most.

Programs/Schools/Divisions:

- VKRP data can help determine where resources are needed the most as well as professional development needs for teachers.

State-Level:

- Advance equity by improving the quality and availability of early childhood education to low-income families across Virginia

Virginia is well-prepared to support and measure children's growth over time

Measure classroom experiences most strongly linked to children's outcomes

- Adult-child interactions
- Curriculum

Includes all publicly-funded birth-five classrooms and settings

- Infants, toddlers, preschoolers
- VPI, ECSE, Head Start/Early Head Start, Title I, center-based care, family day homes

Link children's experiences to their school readiness outcomes

- LinkB5 data collection portal
- VKRP assessments (preschool and kindergarten)